

Williamsburg Bird Club
November, 20, 2024

Hybrid meeting conducted in person at Quarterpath rec Center, Room 2, 202 Quarterpath Rd,
Williamsburg and via Zoom hosted by Ann Carpenter at 6:30 pm

Attendance: 32 in person; 14 via Zoom

President's Remarks: President Nancy Barnhart greeted everyone present and on Zoom on this last meeting of 2025. She announced that following the presentation there would be a brief business meeting including the election of club officers.

Program: Patty Maloney, Vice President Programs, introduced the evening's speaker, James Abbott from Yorktown, VA. He is senior Environmental Educator and Master Captain for the James River Association. He attended the University of North Carolina in Wilmington, where he earned a BS in Biology and Environmental Science, and an MS in Environmental Science. His presentation, *Belize: Small Country, Big Birding*, focused on the come-back of the Harpy Eagles and referred to his experiences leading expeditions of undergraduates to study the food webs of the upper Bladen River in the Bladen Nature Preserve (BNR) in Belize on the Yucatan Peninsula.

The preserve is the crown jewel of the Maya Mountain Massif, which includes 16 protected areas covering almost 2 million acres of roadless continuous tropical forest. The Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education (BFREE) was founded in 1995 with the primary purpose of developing and implementing a conservation program for the BNR. To achieve this goal, BFREE leased a 1,153 area privately protected area and established a biological field station strategically located in the foothills of the Maya. It's an incredible hotspot for biodiversity where tapirs, howler monkeys, jaguars, and harpy eagles are often spotted, and is the last stronghold for many endangered species.

The Field Station supports research by providing housing and logistical support for researchers and conservation workers. The only access is via a 6-mile unpaved road and requires a research permit issued by Belize. In 2007-8, as an undergrad at UNC, James had done the data processing for the first Harpy Eagle found in Belize, which had previously been considered too far north for them. As a grad student, he led field trips to collect more data about the critically endangered Harpy Eagles. They are the second-largest eagle in the world by weight, with a wingspan of up to 79 inches (compact for such a large bird but allows hunting through dense foliage), and massive talons that can measure 3 to 5 inches, a size comparable to the claws of a grizzly bear! Harpy pairs reproduce every 2 or 3 years and lay 1 or 2 eggs in a nest described as being much bigger than that of a Bald Eagle. Like our Bald Eagles, they nest in the crown of the tallest tree near the edge of an open area. James's group closely monitored a nest with one youngster. They called in Panamanian experts, who, donned with Kevlar vest and helmet, put a GPS backpack on the chick so it can be constantly monitored as it leaves the nest.

A major focus of their research was on the unique ecosystem in Belize for Harpy Eagles. In Southern Central and South America, where Harpy Eagles are usually found, 90% of their diet is sloths. Sloths move so slowly that algae grows on their fur, which helps them blend into the rainforest canopy. A Harpy Eagle hunts by perching on a branch high in the canopy for hours at a time using its fine-tuned hearing to identify its prey. Once it spots its unlucky target, the eagle dives from the branch to snare its meal with its talons. But there are no sloths in Belize. The question was to determine whether the eagles' hunting strategy in Belize was a complete break from their traditional strategy of hunting passive predator avoidance prey (sloths) or had they modified their strategy to hunt active prey like monkeys. Harpy Eagles don't soar like most raptors but sit silently on a branch making them very hard for researchers to find to study. James found that the food web was driven by the limestone-rich geology in the area that supports a huge diversity of land snails that consequently supports a rich food web including monkeys, peccaries, and coatimundis. The eagles preferred prey were the coatimundis;

grabbing them while they were still hanging around their tree-top nests before they left for the forest floor. The research team's findings proved this unique food web allows the 15-20 Harpy Eagles in Belize to survive that far north.

Announcements:

Election of 2025 WBC Board Members: Nancy Barnhart, substituting for Deborah Humphries who'd chaired the Nominating Committee, read the names of the proposed slate of officers which is a repeat of our current officers. The slate was printed in the November issue of *The Flyer* and read as follows:

- President: Nancy Barnhart
- Vice President: Programs: Patty Maloney
- Vice President: Newsletter: Mary Ellen Hodges
- Treasurer: Ann Carpenter
- Secretary: Cathy Millar
- Member at Large: Donna Benson
- Member at Large: Deborah Humphries
- Past President: Cheryl J. Jacobson

There were no nominations from the floor. Nancy asked for a show of hands of those both present and on Zoom of those who approved the slate. The vote of approval was unanimous.

Bird Walks – Scott Hemler: Scott announced the following:

November 23: Monthly 2- hour Saturday walk at New Quarter Park starting at 8am.

Owl Prowl - November 30th: Nancy announced that she'd be leading an Owl Prowl sponsored by New Quarter Park at 6 pm. Those interested should sign-up at NQP office.

Field Trips – George Martin:

Saturday, January 18, 2025: Rose Ryan will lead our first field trip of the year at Dutch Gap. More info to follow.

The Flyer – Nancy reported there would be no issue in December. Mary Ellen Hodges, editor, has set a deadline for December 28th for articles/photos for the January issue. She is hoping for submission of pictures & experiences members have during the 2024 Christmas Bird Count.

Programs – Patty Maloney: Patty announced that:

January 15, 2025 at 6:30pm, our January 2025 meeting at Quarterpath Rec Center will be a joint one with the Historic Rivers Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists. The speaker will be W&M professor, Dr. John Swaddle, presenting *Sparrows as Sentinels: Health Study Illustrating the Interconnectedness between Humans and Wildlife*.

Purple Martins – Cheryl Jacobson: Cheryl presented an update on the Purple Martin project. All the gourds have been cleaned and stored. She and her teams monitored 7 poles of gourds with only 1 not being used. The gourds at Fords Colony were most productive (102 fledged); with the ones at VIMS still not being claimed. Black rat snakes claimed 2 gourds of babies at York River Park. The pole was moved from NQP to Chickahominy where it was more needed. A total of almost 200 babies fledged this year. She expressed gratefulness to our club, CVWO and Master Naturalists for support. She thanked the individuals of her teams for helping monitor the gourds.

Dec 22, 2024 Christmas Bird Count – Shirley Devan- Bird Counts: Shirley reported that she has emailed to the membership details about participating and will linger after this meeting to answer any questions. She already has had a good response and welcomes more field and bird feeder watchers. Last year, half of the counters were feeder watchers. She's already seen Purple Finches at her feeders. A question was asked if one hears a bird that Merlin identifies but that you can't see or don't personally know, can that be included. Nancy reported that Audubon doesn't want a bird included in the count that was not identified personally.

New Year's Day 19th Bird and Birder Show: January 1st: Shirley Devan will host this event from 1-3 pm at Chickahominy Riverfront Park. Master Naturalists and family/friends are invited.

End of Meeting: A free raffle was held and refreshments organized by the Bailey family were offered.

Nancy Barnhart adjourned the meeting at 7:50 pm

Respectfully submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club
December 18, 2024